

Allowing Undocumented/Illegal Immigrants to Enlist in the US
Military

Captain JC ZurLippe

Major AB Irvin, CG 7

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Introduction

The US military has been recruiting foreigners to serve in its military forces since the country was first formed. Prior to the Civil War, about half of those serving in the US military were immigrants.¹ During the Civil War, 1 in 5 Union soldiers was an immigrant;² and today, of the 65,000 foreign-born men and women serving in the US military,³ approximately 29,000 are non-citizens (green card holders).⁴ While these legal immigrants are allowed to serve in the US military, undocumented/illegal immigrants are not allowed to serve. Nevertheless, undocumented/illegal immigrants should be allowed to enlist in the US military because doing so would ease the current difficulties in recruiting an all-volunteer force, many of these individuals already possess the qualities needed for military service, and the trend in current and proposed legislation is moving toward allowing both illegal immigrants and foreigners to enlist.

¹ Fred W. Baker III, Servicemembers Receive 'Outstanding Americans by Choice' Award, URL:<<http://www.defenselink.mil/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=47576>>, Accessed December 13, 2008.

² Max Boot, CFR Member- Recruit Foreigners To US Military, Rense.com, URL:<<http://www.rense.com/general63/CFRr.htm>>, Accessed 8 December 2008.

³ Jeanne Batalove, Immigrants in the US Armed Forces, Migration Policy Institute, May 15, 2008.

⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, New Accessions Pilot Program Authorized, December 5, 2008, URL:<<http://www.defenselink.mil/releases/release.aspx?releaseid=12384>>, Accessed December 8, 2008.

Ease Current Recruiting Efforts

The most obvious reason to allow illegal immigrants to enlist in the US military is that it would help current recruiting efforts. The current difficulties in the US military recruiting environment go back to the early 1990s, when US troop strength was drawn down after the end of the Cold War and the Gulf War. As the Global War On Terrorism (GWOT) continues to drag on, the Army and Marine Corps, who are suffering the preponderance of combat injuries while fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, are finding it more difficult to recruit new enlistees. In addition to the extended GWOT, the Army has been authorized an end strength increase of 22,000, and the Marine Corps 5,000. In an attempt to meet these recruiting goals, Congress has raised the maximum enlistment age to 42, which currently only the Army uses. The Army has also lowered numerous quality standards: the requirement for a high school diploma, the score on the military aptitude test, and increased medical waivers. Worst of all is the increase of moral waivers, which allow someone to enlist who has past criminal convictions or confirmed drug use. In addition to these lowered standards, the Army and Marine Corps have spent thousands of dollars in

additional recruiting and retention bonuses.⁵ By allowing the US military to recruit illegal immigrants, the US government, and taxpayers, could save the money that is currently spent on additional bonuses, as well improve the quality of the force by raising the standards again.

According to the Migration Policy Institute, an estimated 360,000 undocumented high school graduates in the United States are between the ages of 18 and 24. Another 715,000 youths are between the ages of 5 and 17.⁶ Based on research from the National Immigration Law Center, about 65,000 undocumented immigrant students graduate from US high schools each year.⁷ Many of these illegal immigrants are Hispanic. Hispanic youths have consistently shown a higher propensity to serve in the military than black or white youths. According to a 2004 study by the Center for Naval Analysis (CNA), male, high school seniors had the following propensity to serve in the military: Hispanics (44%), Blacks (36%), and Whites (24%).⁸ A 2005 CNA study also stated that non-citizens are less likely to drop out

⁵ Jeff Jacoby, "Through the Military, a Path to Citizenship," The Boston Globe, February 13, 2008, pg. A13.

⁶ Jeanne Batalova and Michael Fix, New Estimates of Unauthorized Youth Eligible for Legal Status under the DREAM Act, Immigration Background, Migration Policy Institute, October 2006.

⁷ Barbara Ferry, "Waiting for a DREAM: Senate act would help students work toward citizenship." Knight Ridder Tribune Business News. April 3, 2006, 1.

⁸ Center for Naval Analysis, Recruiting Hispanics: The Marine Corps Experience Final Report, January 2004, 20.

of the service immediately after basic training, and again after the three-year mark, compared with US citizens.⁹ All these statistics signal that a significant population of illegal immigrants is available to recruit from, thus increasing the recruiting pool and helping to relieve the strain on military recruiters.

Many Posses the Qualities Needed for Military Service

Approximately 35,000 non-citizens presently serve in the US military. These non-citizens provide a diversified cultural and linguistic background. As current operations stretch the US military across various countries, this cultural and linguistic diversity benefits military forces working in these foreign lands. Further, standards would not be lowered for illegal immigrants. They would have to meet the same enlistment standards as all regular US citizens and green card holders. In fact, the recent lowering of standards could be raised back to its previous, higher level.

Numerous examples also exist of undocumented immigrants willing to serve in the US military, if only given the chance. One such individual is high school senior, Jonathon, from T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, VA. Jonathon plays soccer

⁹ Center for Naval Analysis, Non-Citizens in Today's Military: Final Report, April 2005, 56-63.

for his high school team, is interested in computers and engineering, and is fluent in both English and Spanish. He has expressed interest in military service to both the Navy and Marine Corps, and is eligible to serve, except for one thing: He is an undocumented immigrant. His parents brought him here from Ecuador at the age of 11 and then stayed beyond their time limit on their tourist visas.¹⁰ A similar story is that of Sebastian. "...21, graduated from high school in Prince George's County in 2005. He arrived in 1999, in search of a job to help his family back in Mexico. But high school changed everything, he said. He discovered that in the United States, one can have a future. He had a series of online conversations with military recruiters. But he cut the contacts short when he became afraid that they'd find out about his status and report him."¹¹ He goes on to say, "I've been here almost eight years. I feel like I belong to this country ... People like me, we want to serve the country. We love this country. We don't have papers. We can't afford to go to college. The military is the perfect option for us."¹²

¹⁰ Brigid Schulte, "Why won't we let them fill the ranks?", The Washington Post, June 3, 2007, pg. B01.

¹¹ Schulte, "Let them fill the ranks".

¹² Schulte, "Let them fill the ranks".

Current Legislation Moving in that Direction

The trend in current and proposed legislation is moving toward not only allowing illegal immigrants to serve in the US military, but also non-resident foreigners as well. A bill that was first introduced in 2001, but has yet to be passed as a law, is the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act. This piece of legislation allows undocumented immigrants a path towards becoming US citizens, but requires that they must serve at least two years in the US military or complete at least two years of college. In addition, for these individuals to become eligible for US citizenship, they must be 15 or younger when entering the US, have lived in the US for at least 5 years, and have received a high school diploma or GED in the US. These individuals must meet the same military enlistment standards as regular citizens or legal permanent residents. According to a news release from US Senator Richard Durbin's office, "When I hear some describe this bill as amnesty, I wonder, if someone is willing to risk his or her life to serve in our military in a combat zone, is that a giveaway ... We can allow a generation of immigrant students with great potential and ambitions to contribute more fully to our society

and national security, or we can relegate them to a future in the shadows, which would be a loss for all Americans.”¹³

In addition to Senator Durbin, high-ranking members within the Department of Defense support the bill as well. The Under Secretary of Defense (Personnel and Readiness), David S.C. Chu, spoke to the Senate Armed Services Committee on July 10, 2006, about the need for legislation like the DREAM Act. He made note of existing legislation that “the Secretary concerned may authorize the enlistment of a person... if the Secretary determines that such enlistment is vital to the national interest.” He goes on to address how the DREAM Act would benefit not only these undocumented immigrants, but also the country as a whole:

According to an April 2006 study from the National Immigration Law Center, there are an estimated 50,000 to 65,000 undocumented alien young adults who entered the U.S. at an early age and graduate from high school each year, many of whom are bright, energetic and potentially interested in military service...Under current law, these young people are not eligible to enlist in the military, until and unless the Armed Services determine that it is vital to the national interest as provided by section 504. If their parents are undocumented or in immigration limbo, most of these young people have no mechanism to obtain legal residency even if they have lived most of their lives here. Yet many of these young people may wish to join the military, and have the attributes needed - education, aptitude, fitness, and moral qualifications. In fact, many are High School Diploma Graduates, and may have fluent language skills -- both in English and their native language. Provisions of S. 2611, such as the DREAM Act,

¹³ US Fed News, Sen. Durbin, along with military, education leaders, urges congress to support bright, accomplished kids with bipartisan DREAM Act, October 23, 2007.

would provide these young people the opportunity of serving the United States in uniform.¹⁴

A senior military officer, Major General William L. Enyart of the Illinois National Guard, shares a similar view on the DREAM Act as the Under Secretary of Defense:

As the Adjutant General, I support this bill as it rewards those who have earned the right to become American citizens. It opens a pool of recruits who have a great desire to serve. Service to our country should be encouraged, respected and rewarded. This is an investment in the human capital of our country....I believe those who are willing to serve should also receive an opportunity to succeed.¹⁵

Allowing undocumented immigrants to serve in the US military clearly has support at the highest levels of US government and military. In fact, some would say that the US should actively recruit foreigners into the US military as well. Max Boot, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, says "The military would do well to open its ranks not only to legal immigrants but also to illegal ones and, as important, to untold numbers of young men and women who are not here now but would like to come." He references a piece of legislation passed by Congress in 1950, the Lodge Act. It allowed the US

¹⁴ Under Secretary of Defense (Personnel and Readiness), The Honorable David S. C. Chu, Prepared Statement to Senate Armed Services Committee, July 10, 2006.

¹⁵ US Fed News, "Sen. Durbin to support DREAM Act".

Army to recruit foreigners with special language skills, for its special operations forces, in exchange for US citizenship.¹⁶

In a further step towards recruiting foreigners, on December 5, 2008, the Department of Defense authorized the military services to recruit foreigners temporarily residing in the US. These foreigners must be here legally on work, student, or temporary visas, and have backgrounds in specialized fields: health care, language and foreign culture.¹⁷

Counterarguments

Many would be quick to oppose allowing undocumented immigrants from enlisting in the military. They say those that came to this country illegally broke the law and should not be allowed to serve and, subsequently, be rewarded with citizenship. The DREAM Act, in its current form, already addresses this concern. It would only allow those brought to this country as minors, under the age of 16, eligibility to enlist. The premise being that they were too young to know that they entered the US illegally.

Much of the opposition stems from people's lack of understanding of the military as a whole. In discussing the issue, Fernando Suarez refers to the military option of the

¹⁶ Boot, "Recruit Foreigners To US Military".

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, New Accessions Pilot Program Authorized.

DREAM Act as "a covert draft in which thousands of youth ... will be sent to Iraq ... where they will have to surrender their moral values and become war criminals."¹⁸ This view is severely skewed. A college student, Luis Avila, admits telling fellow students "go to college and then join the military so they can enter as an officer rather than be put on the front lines."¹⁹ He obviously does not understand that being on the front lines has nothing to do with rank.

Others would say that the military would become a low-wage occupation, filled with uneducated criminals. This is based on stereotypes of undocumented immigrants: uneducated Hispanics willing to work for below minimum wage. Current enlistment standards, in fact, would not be any lower than they currently are today.

Conclusion

This country has a rich history of providing, to those who come to live here, the opportunity to pursue their dreams. Those dreams should not be crushed just because someone is branded as an undocumented, or illegal, immigrant. Many of these young men and women possess the qualities needed to

¹⁸ Fernando Suarez, "The DREAM Act's 'military option'," People's Weekly World vol. 22 no. 11, August 18-24, 2007: 12.

¹⁹ Daniel Gonzalez, "A Military Route to Citizenship; Plan for Undocumented Youths Stirs Debate", The Arizona Republic, September 17, 2007, Pg. 1.

succeed in this country. If that success is parlayed into military service, then the current strain on military recruiting will be eased. The country is already heading in that direction, as current trends in legislation are allowing both undocumented immigrants and foreigners to serve. These young, undocumented immigrants currently in the US should be allowed to enlist in the US military. It is time to do what is right for both them and this country.

2079 words

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